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ABSTRACT

This study reports a content analysis designed to investigate the nature of minority portrayals and cross-racial relationships on television programs and commercials during 1987. The sample of television analyzed included 72 hours of programing and advertisements obtained from Cornell's HDTV Archive. Program characters with speaking lines, and characters in a crowd of five or more, were coded according to age, race, gender, occupation, and speaking or nonspeaking role. Primary program role was included as a coded variable to differentiate between the occupation and major function of each character. Also assessed were the frequency of minority-white interactions, and the tone and context of those interactions. Each instance of cross-racial interaction was judged to be positive or negative in tone, and social or professional in context. Findings were strikingly similar to those reported in previous content analyses. The nature of minority protrayals has remained virtually unchanged. Character analysis revealed several ways in which television minorities were less prestigious than whites. Cross-racial friendships among youth were commonplace outside of the class. In comparison with youths' cross-racial relations, adults' were predominately positive, but tended to be limited to less voluntary, job-related situations. (RH)

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LIVING COLOR: MINORITY PORTRAYALS AND CROSS-RACIAL INTERACTIONS ON TELEVISION

Paper presented at the 1989 Conference of
The Society For Research In Child Development

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Nicholas Johnson, a former member of the Federal Communications Commission, once said: "All television is educational, the only question is: What does it teach?" The answer must take into consideration two factors: What is on television to be learned, and what does the viewer already know? Television has become a major socializing agent for children in the United States not only because they watch so much of it, but also because of the power of its images. Its messages will vary for different types and ages of viewers, since they have different needs, interests, and backgrounds, and since they watch different programs.

Children are especially vulnerable to the influences of television. Developmentally, many young viewers do not have the cognitive capacity or social sophistication necessary to make proper associations and draw suitable inferences from the multitude of behaviors presented in the typical program (Collins, 1983; Collins 1979). More importantly, children are less likely to have had much contact with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and thus television may be their primary source of information about minorities. There is evidence from the research literature suggesting that low-income children watch television with the expectation of learning about different kinds of people: namely, how they look, behave, talk, and dress (Greenberg, 1972). The same is true of other white children, who

perceive television's portrayals of Blacks and other minorities as a central and important source of information about a world they know little about (Greenberg & Burek-Neuendorf, 1980). Finally, children often lack an established value system from which to evaluate the ideas presented on television. Himmelweit and her colleagues, doing research in England, reported an increased likelihood of vicarious learning from television "if through friends, parents, or immediate environment the viewer is not already supplied with a set of values which would provide a standard against which to assess the views offered by television" (quoted by Berry & Mitchell-Kernan, 1982, p. 4). Thus, while it is only one source of information about the world, television is an especially powerful source of information for children.

The television audience has remained remarkably stable for about the last twenty years. On the average, women watch more television than men, older adults watch more than younger adults, and young children (2-5 years) watch more than older children (6-11 years), partly because the older children are in school for some of the day. Teenagers watch the least television of any demographic group, while individuals 55 and older watch the most. The average child (2-12) and the average adult (18-55) watch between 3 to 4 hours of television every day (although not necessarily the same 3-4 hours). Programs that attract the largest audience are adventure programs and feature films, followed in order by general dramas, situation comedies, and

suspense/mystery dramas. Informational programs (news and talk shows) draw about half the audience of entertainment programs (Nielsen, 1988).

Controversy surrounding the portrayal of racial and ethnic minorities on television is almost as old as the medium itself. Peoples of color have historically been both underrepresented and misrepresented on television. During the early years, nonwhites comprised fewer than 3% of all character portrayals (Smythe, 1953). By the early 1970s, however, this figure had increased to approximately 11% (U.S. Commission On Civil Rights, 1977), and there it remained throughout most of this decade (Greenberg, 1982). Although Blacks have always been television's most visible minority group, parity with the U.S. census data has yet to be achieved. Furthermore, minority characters, be they Blacks, Asians, Native Americans, or Latinos, have traditionally been less diverse, less dignified, and less positive than either white characters or real life minorities.

Stereotypic black roles of the 1950s and early 1960s gave way to more subtle indicators of racism in the 1970s (see MacDonald, 1983, for an historical review). For example, black characters tended to be younger and poorer, and less likely to be cast in professional occupations, dramatic or romantic roles (Greenberg, 1982; Berry, 1980; Graves, 1980). Moreover, Blacks on television were more likely to appear in segregated environments, with a

great percentage of minority's appearance time concentrated in a very small percentage of the programs (Weigel & Howes, 1982; Weigel, Loomis, & Soja, 1980).

The misrepresentation of other minority groups persisted through the 1970s as well. Native American organizations protested the depiction of Indians as savage, ignorant, and cowardly warriors. However, the popularity of television westerns rendered the protests futile. Asian portrayals on television paralleled those in motion pictures. Women were either docile and submissive, or seductive and sexy. Asian men tended to be cunning and sly villains, or superwise, Charlie Chan-type detectives. They, too, were featured in limited occupational roles such as laundry men, waiters, or karate experts. Finally, television's Hispanics were typically poor and unemployed barrio-dwellers, or aggressive and hostile gang members (Greenberg, 1982).

This article focuses on the programming frequently watched by children in America. Specifically, the present study reports a content analysis designed to investigate the nature of minority portrayals and cross-racial relationships on television programs and commercials broadcast during 1987. Although no formal hypotheses were tested, the analysis was guided by several questions of interest: Are minorities still underrepresented and misrepresented on television, as earlier research indicated? If so, to what degree? How are interactions between white and

minority characters portrayed? Do they exist? If so, how frequently? Are they voluntary or involuntary interactions? Do they occur more frequently among children or adults?

METHOD

Sample

This sample of television analyzed in this study was comprised of 72 hours of broadcast programming and advertisements representative of network television during 1987. The HDTV Archive at Cornell University was the source of the programming (see Condry, 1987, for a description of the HDTV Archive). The sample included 18 hours from each of four equally spaced months: March, June, September, and December. For each month, a composite "week" was generated by systematic randomization: that is, one Sunday was randomly selected, as was one Monday, one Tuesday, one Wednesday, and so on. Within each composite week, those hours deemed by the A. C. Nielsen Company to be heavy children's viewing hours were selected for analysis. These include weekdays from 4:00 - 6:00 p.m. and 7:00 - 11:00 p.m., Saturday mornings from 8:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon, and weekend evenings from 8:00 - 11:00 p.m. Furthermore, the 18 hours coded from each month include six hours of each of the three major commercial networks (ABC, CBS, NBC), broadcasting through Syracuse, New York affiliate stations.

Every television program and commercial aired during the hours

selected for inclusion in this study was analyzed with the following exceptions:

1. Promotional advertisements for movies (cinema or television), TV programs, sporting events, concerts, or other special events;

2. News briefs;

3. Programs and commercials featuring non-human animated characters (human animated characters were coded); and

4. Commercials in which there were no visible characters.

Procedure

Program characters with speaking lines were coded according to their age, race, gender, occupation, and appearance (i.e., regular character or guest appearance). An additional variable, primary program role, was included to differentiate between the occupation and the major function of each character. For example, if the star of a program is a private detective, and the plots are centered around catching criminals, then this character's occupation and primary program role would be the same. However, if the major function of a program's star is as a parent, even though the character's occupation is an obstetrician, then the two variables would be coded differently. This distinction allowed for more precise program and character analysis.

All television commercial characters with speaking lines were coded. Non-speaking characters who appeared individually or in a

small group (fewer than five people) were also included in the analysis. Furthermore, characters in a crowd (five or more people) whom camera angles distinguished from the others were also coded as a part of the study. Here also, the variables of interest include age, race, gender, and appearance (speaking or nonspeaking character).

One final variable of importance concerns the nature of cross-racial interactions featured in all programs and advertisements which included minority characters. Previous research (Weigel, Loomis, & Soja, 1980) had indicated that cross-racial interactions observed during prime-time programming tended to be formalized and cooperative, typically limited to job-related settings. The present study assessed not only the frequency of minority/white interactions, but the tone and the context as well. Each time a minority character was featured, coders noted whether this character was portrayed interacting with a white character. In addition, each instance of cross-racial interaction was judged to be either positive or negative (tone), and either social or professional (context). Just as job-related interactions were coded as professional for adult characters, school-related interactions were coded as "professional" for children and adolescents. These evaluations were designed to provide insight into the volitional nature of the interaction, that is, whether or not the characters' interaction occurred by choice or by force of circumstances.

Three hours of television programming not included in the sample were analyzed by two examiners trained in the specific coding procedures. Interrater agreement ranged from .86 (occupation) to .93 (race). Subsequently, only one coder's scores were used in the analysis.

RESULTS

Appearance Frequencies

While the number of white characters on television far exceeds the actual percent of Whites in the United States population, that of Blacks and Hispanics falls short of population statistics. Table 1 presents the distribution of television characters by racial group in both programs and commercials. These data reveal significant underrepresentation of minorities, particularly on television commercials. Asians were the only minority group for whom parity with the census was nearly achieved. Only one Native American was identified from the 6663 characters included in the study. Consequently, further analysis of the nature of native American portrayals was not possible.

---insert Table 1 about here---

Character Analysis

Nonwhites on television continue to be cast in younger roles than their white counterparts. Seventeen percent of the minorities were children, compared to 12.7% of the white characters. Further analysis of minority portrayals also confirms findings

reported in earlier studies (i.e. Greenberg, 1982; Berry, 1980; Graves, 1980). Figure 1 shows the frequencies with which Whites and minorities appeared in different occupation levels.

---insert Figure 1 about here---

While the occupation levels for all television characters is significantly higher than those actually observed in the United States, these data indicate that nonwhites continue to be cast as less prestigious characters than Whites. Minorities were just as likely to be employed as whites. However, Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics on television were cast as blue collar workers and public safety personnel (e.g., law enforcers, firefighters) much more frequently. An analysis of the primary program role of each character revealed more subtle indicators of minorities' lower status. Figure 2 presents the frequencies of each racial group by primary program role.

---insert Figure 2 about here---

Whites appeared more often as family members and as friends or neighbors than nonwhites did. Moreover, minorities were more than twice as likely to be criminals or delinquents, and were cast as patients or victims much more frequently than Whites. None of the Hispanic characters appeared as a friend or neighbor, yet their criminal/delinquency rate was highest of all racial groups.

Further differences in character portrayals exist in terms of the types of programs featuring minorities. Since nonwhites are more

likely to be cast as criminals or delinquents, and as police officers, it is not surprising that they appear on crime dramas at a much greater rate than whites. Situation comedies, talk shows, and variety shows also featured minorities significantly more often than whites, while the percent of white characters is greater only on news/documentary programs and on movies.

Cross-Racial Interactions

Interactions between minority and white characters were analyzed in terms of frequency as well as tone (positive or negative) and context (professional or social setting). The results are presented in Table 2. Nearly 40% of the minorities were portrayed in segregated environments. A great majority of the cross-racial interactions were positive. Among adults, however, these tended to be job-related associations rather than social interactions. Conversely, nonwhite youth were more than three times as likely to engage in positive, social interactions with white characters than nonwhite adults were. Only six percent of the minorities were featured in negative interactions with whites.

---insert Table 2 about here---

DISCUSSION

The findings reported in this study are strikingly similar to those reported in previous content analyses. Studies analyzing television content during the 1970s found that minority

appearances on dramatic programs averaged approximately 11% during that decade (Greenberg, et al., 1980; Seggar, Hafen, & Hannon-Gladden, 1981). That the present study reports a figure smaller than 10% does not reflect a decrease in minority representation, but rather an increase in the type of broadcasting included in the sample. This study included all of the programs and advertisements (with few exceptions, as described in the Method section) aired during heavy children's viewing hours, and thus provides a more valid representation of the "environment" of television. Advertisements, although they represent less than 13 minutes of broadcasting per hour (Condry, 1987; Condry, Bence, & Scheibe, 1988), bombard the television viewer with character portrayals. In this study, an average hour of television consisted of 71 commercial characters (65 white, 6 nonwhite), compared to only 22 program characters (19 white, 3 nonwhite). Thus, the inclusion of advertisements provides an important addition to our fund of knowledge about the structure of television.

For comparative purposes, however, the present sample was divided, and analysis was conducted on fictional programs only (movies, situation comedies, and dramas). The results indicate that nonwhites comprised 14.5% of the total characters, a gain of 3.5% over the Greenberg, et al., and Seggar, et al. studies. While this increase is encouraging, it is not necessarily indicative of a general trend in television broadcasting.

Fictional characters represent only 15% of the total number of appearances in the present sample.

The nature of minority portrayals has remained virtually unchanged as well. Character analysis revealed several ways in which television minorities are less prestigious than whites. They appear as children with much greater frequency, and as such are more limited in both authority and responsibility. Although minority characters are just as likely to be employed as whites, they generally hold lower status jobs. Furthermore, nonwhites are rarely cast as friends and neighbors, but they frequently appear as both perpetrators and victims of criminal and delinquent acts moreso than white characters.

Nearly 40% of television's minorities have no contact with whites. When cross-racial interactions do occur, however, an interesting trend emerges. Children and teens typically engage in positive, social interactions with white characters. In other words, cross-racial friendships among youth were commonplace outside of the classroom. By adulthood, however, positive social interactions with whites had sharply diminished. Adults' cross-racial relations, though predominately positive, tended to be limited to less voluntary job-related situations. These findings suggest the degree to which the broadcasting industry has accepted integration in American society. Socially, friendships among minority and white children and adolescents are

acceptable, but by adulthood, both white and nonwhite individuals are expected to have outgrown the tendency to interact socially.

Bradley S. Greenberg (1988) recently proposed a different approach to the study of television's content. He called it the "drench" hypothesis, suggesting that portrayals of Blacks on some programs, for instance "The Cosby Show," may overwhelm other portrayals of Blacks. Many more people watch "The Cosby Show" and many more may be influenced by it than other, less popular shows. While the other shows represent a "drip, drip, drip" of influence, "The Cosby Show" "drenches" the audience. Consequently, it may have vastly more impact than the others.

Greenberg's hypothesis suggests that future researchers pay more attention to role portrayals that stand out, that are deviant and intense, for they may represent more important viewing experiences. In Greenberg's own words: "The drench hypothesis, in its current, primitive form, asserts that critical images may contribute more to impression-formation and image-building than does the sheer frequency of television and behaviors that are viewed" (Greenberg, 1988, p.100).

Broad content analyses such as the present one define the boundaries within which viewers extract meaning. Whether or not specific role portrayals are more influential than others can and

should be tested and demonstrated empirically. Surely in the long run, studies focusing on both the drip and the drench of television will guide researchers toward more specific evidence of television's socialization effects.

The study presented here shows that, like the viewing audience, the programming and advertisements on television have hardly changed at all, at least from the perspective of peoples of color. This finding should not be taken lightly, even though exceptions (e.g., "The Cosby Show") are singled out with justifiable pride by network officials. Television may have come some distance since "Beulah" and "Amos 'N Andy," but this research suggests that it still has a long way to go.

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Table 1. Percent of Television Characters By Race

	WHITE (n=6016)	BLACK (n=512)	ASIAN (n=85)	HISPANIC (n=43)
Total Television	**90.3**	**7.7**	**1.3**	**.6**
programs	86.6	8.9	2.2	1.9
commercials	91.5	7.3	.9	.3
U.S. Population	**84.5**	**12.2**	**1.5**	**6.4**

[1]Figures reported for Whites and Blacks were obtained from a 1987 population update. Statistics for Asians and Hispanics were taken from 1980 Census data.

[2]U.S. Census Bureau reports Hispanic origin across all races.

Figure 1.

Percent of Television Characters
by Occupation and Race

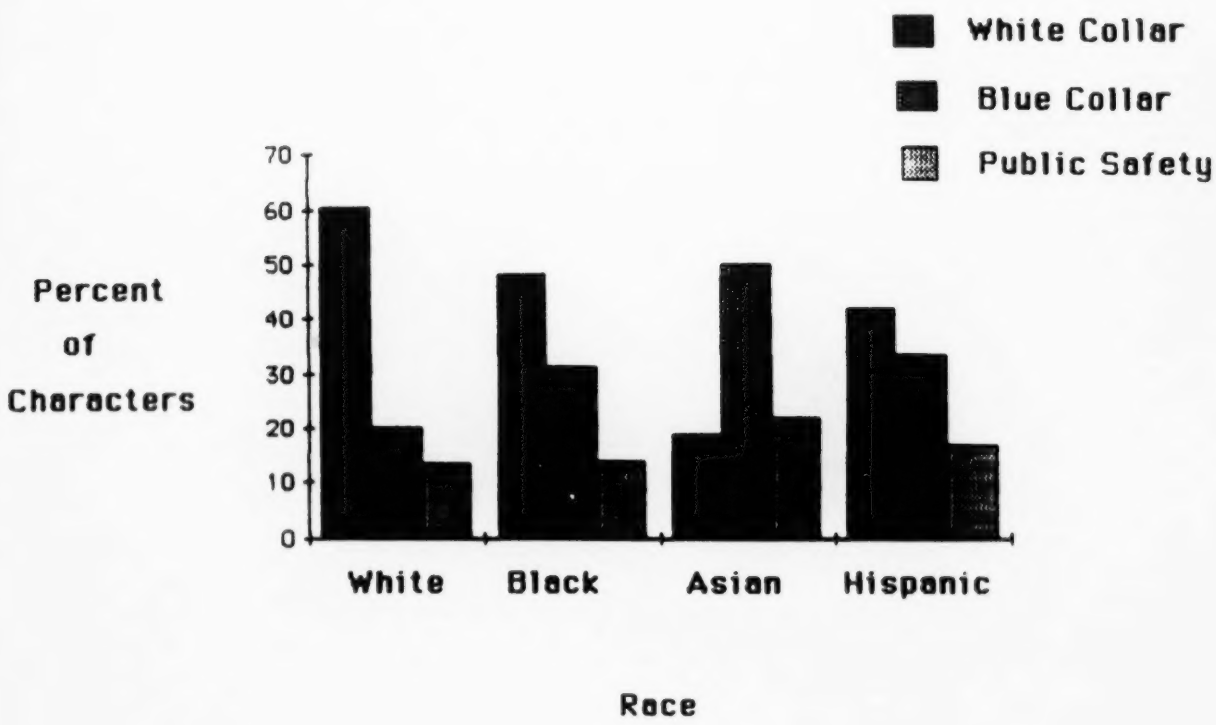

Figure 2.

Percent of Characters in Primary Program Role by Race

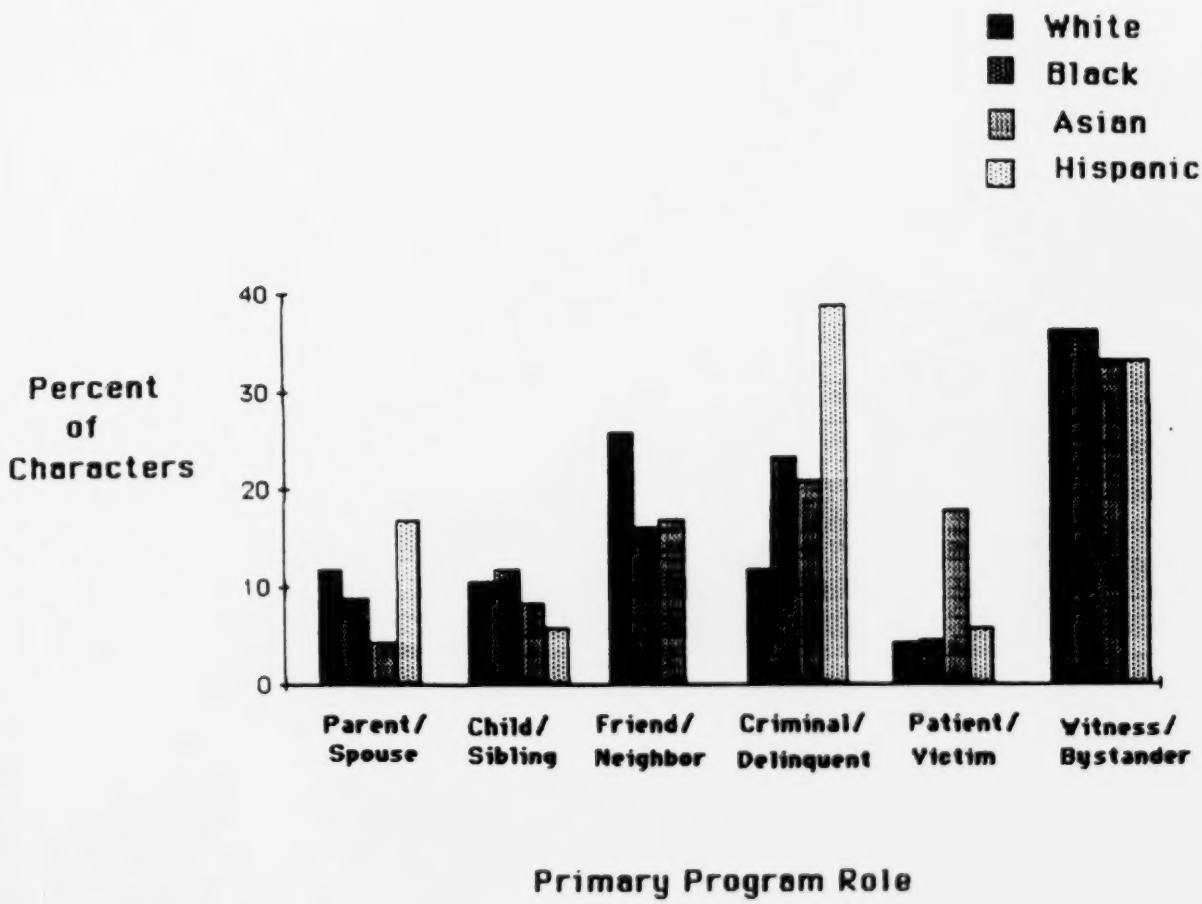

Table 2. Distribution of Cross-Racial Interactions on Television

	Total Minority Sample (n=619)	children (n=99)	teens (n=35)	adults (n=485)
None	**39.9**	**44.4**	**40.0**	**39.0**
Positive	**54.1**	**53.6**	**57.1**	**54.1**
professional	26.5	6.1	5.7	32.2
social	20.0	46.5	51.4	12.4
combination	7.6	1.0	---	9.5
Negative	**6.0**	**2.0**	**2.9**	**7.0**
professional	4.7	---	2.9	5.8
social	1.3	2.0	---	1.2